

“The Day the Church was Born”
+ Pentecost A+
Acts 2:1-21; 1 Corinthians 12:3-13; John 20, 19-23
June 8, 2014

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!

I’ve never understood why Pentecost means so little to people in and outside the church. Perhaps it was having a pastor in my youth who was part of the new Liturgical Renaissance bringing in banners, incense, liturgical dancers and a sense of great celebration for the festivals – and being in choirs at church, college and wherever I was asked to sing but the Festival Sundays of the church year have always been rich with meaning in my life – and they were high occasions for centuries when the life of society centered around the celebrations of the faithful gathered around Word and Sacrament.

Those lofty words mean little inside most churches today and outside of the church people’s only ties to the Great Festivals of Christianity bring up thoughts of one celebration with bunnies and chocolate and the other with an old man driving a reindeer powered sleigh. And so, today, we gather on a quiet Sunday morning in June – “low church” time especially in Minnesota where you can almost hear a universal whine about a rainy weekend instead of Pentecost’s awe and excitement inspiring other-worldly goose-pimpling surreal rushing wind that’s not rushing that filled up a houseful of discouraged and dispirited disciples who suddenly found “tongues as of fire” parking themselves on their heads.

It was no ordinary day the day the body of Christ, the church, was born. Those gathered in hiding to pray didn’t have trouble staying awake in that time of worship or finding their mind wandering to what they could get done after their time together was over. NO - suddenly, they all started talking in languages they had never learned, and Luke, the author of Acts, says that it was the Holy Spirit that did all that and 3,000 people were saved – came to the eternity changing knowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. I’m thinking even Peter, the preacher that day, didn’t go home and take a nap like I will this afternoon – not that day – the day the Church was born.

Yes, there was a great harvest that day – a harvest of souls for the Kingdom that ties in nicely with the original Pentecost – nope; Peter and the disciples didn’t initiate it. Pentecost simply means 50 and it so happens that in that year, it was 50 days from the day Jesus rose from the grave. But long before that—centuries in fact, Pentecost existed as “Shovuos,” which means “weeks” and it celebrates the end of the spring wheat harvest. It was also called “Chag ha-Kotsir,” but you probably already knew that. For 50 days, the Jews worked in the fields harvesting their grain, celebrating God’s gracious providence of seed sown, watered by rain, grown to ripeness and harvested for their very life –bread to eat for the year to come (and taxes to pay – yup, a percentage of the grain they grew went to the govt. – some things never change).

By the time of Jesus, the Pharisees, among others, succeeded in changing Shovuos into an annual celebration of the covenant God had made with Noah to never again destroy the world

with a great flood, and then, as celebrations often do, it gained an even greater prominence as a festival commemorating the giving of the Law, the Torah, to Moses on Mount Sinai.

That is what brought all those folks from nations to celebrate and to pay their respects at the Temple to the God who had made a covenant with them by giving them His Laws so that they might be a special and a righteous people. JWH would be their God and they would be JWH's people – and the laws given to them would be an example to the whole world of the greatness of their God. Hundreds of thousands of faithful pilgrims came with an attitude of awe and respect to Jerusalem; an attitude of respectful obedience because if they did so and as they did so, they believed that God would continue to bless them, despite that very awkward “un-blessing” and downright puzzling horror of Jerusalem being captured and occupied by the Roman Empire.

So Luke goes on to mention that “there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven” currently living in Jerusalem. In fact, that whole, nearly unpronounceable list dreaded by lecturers throughout the world today is actually the listing of every nation thought to exist at that time. Shovuos was going completely as expected, just as it had for centuries, when suddenly, unexpectedly, the thousands gathered were taken by surprise as God began to do a brand new thing.

But here's the thing: before Jesus, there was one way to approach God: with fear, trembling and a hefty sacrifice, an attitude that “if I do this, God will do that.” And, it wasn't working very well, except for the Sadducees who ran the Temple and therefore made a bundle off the sacrifice business, and for the Pharisees, who rather liked the idea that they and their behavior could make God their “divine errand boy.”

Pentecost changed all that, because you notice, it was completely a “God-thing,” the sound of the wind, the tongues of fire lapping at the disciples thinning hair and the usually shy Spirit of God, bursting out all over, giving ordinary people the ability to tell the story of Jesus in every language known to man, so that every last man, woman and child in the mob that gathered to see and hear what was going on would hear what God had done for them.

Maybe that doesn't seem like such big deal, but if you have ever been in a foreign country and you didn't know the language, you might remember the relief of finding someone who spoke enough English to get you where you wanted to go.

So there they are, Parthians, Medes, Elamites and all the rest----all the tribes scattered when God came down and busted up the tower of Babel and now God was bringing them back together again on “The Day the Church was Born.” But if you think of Pentecost simply as the “birthday of the church,” you miss the point completely. It is not how old the Christian Church is or how grateful we are to have limped into another year of existence that we celebrate. We gather to celebrate this festival because God's Church is born anew and again every day as people come to saving faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. It is not how old the church is that brings us today, it is how wide—how wide is the embrace of God's love and grace, that freely, without hesitation or reservation, without laws and rules and conditions comes to us new every morning – as does God's faithfulness.

This day reminds us that every day God empowers God's people to tell the story of Jesus in words that anyone and everyone can understand. The desire for lost souls to come to know Jesus is the motivating force of Christianity – of the church born anew in grace each day – a willingness and eagerness to speak the language of the people who haven't yet met Jesus that the Holy Spirit might draw them into the fellowship of believers to be nurtured, encouraged, to grow in the wisdom and knowledge of the Lord.

Every week in life has its highs and lows – your life and mine. This past week my highlight was having someone ask that we have a prayer each week for souls that are lost – those who do not yet know Jesus. It was a reminder to me of why I became a pastor. It wasn't a career ladder choice – in some ways going on witnessing calls each week for the church where I taught 3rd grade and teaching little children how to share their faith by living it out in our classroom provided me with more focus in sharing the faith. I don't recall thinking that, like Peter, I'd preach and 3,000 new believers would be reborn. What I've learned is that my sermons don't bring new people to Jesus – the Holy Spirit does and, to be honest, it is not usually or often through a pastor at all it is through you – you telling and bringing your friends to worship – to Jesus. It is through all God's people sharing in your own language or even in teaching others English who have come to our community from all over the world – sharing what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

The birth of the church began in one place – Jerusalem where people from all over the world heard about Jesus and the fulfillment of that birth will not end, we are told, until that Gospel-Good News reaches every place. Amen.

Now may our always surprising God, who opened the hearts of His people by sending them His Spirit, direct us by that same Spirit to reach out to all His scattered children!